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MARK TWAIN.

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DURING the last twenty years, a profound change has taken place in the attitude of the reading public toward Mark Twain. I can remember very well when he was regarded merely as a humorist, and one opened his books with an anticipatory grin. Very few supposed that he belonged to literature; and a complete, uniform edition of his "Works" would perhaps have been received with something of the mockery that greeted Ben Jonson's folio in 1616. Professor Richardson's "American Literature," which is still a standard work, appeared originally in 1886. My copy, which bears the date 1892, contains only two references in the index to Mark Twain, while Mr. Cable, for example, receives ten; and the whole volume fills exactly 990 pages. Looking up one of the two references, we find the following opinion:

"But there is a class of writers, authors ranking below Irving or Lowell, and lacking the higher artistic or moral purpose of the greater humorists, who amuse a generation and then pass from sight. Every period demands a new manner of jest, after the current fashion. . . . The reigning favorites of the day are Frank R. Stockton, Joel Chandler Harris, the various newspaper jokers, and 'Mark Twain.' But the creators of 'Pomona' and 'Rudder Grange,' of 'Uncle Remus and his Folk-lore Stories,' and 'Innocents Abroad,' clever as they are, must make hay while the sun shines. Twenty years hence, unless they chance to enshrine their wit in some higher literary achievement, their unknown successors will be the privileged comedians of the republic. Humor alone never gives its masters a place in literature; it must co-exist with literary qualities, and must usually be joined with such pathos as one finds in Lamb, Hood, Irving or Holmes."

It is interesting to remember that before this pronouncement

was published, "Tom Sawyer" and "Huckleberry Finn" had been read by thousands. Professor Richardson continued: "Two or three divisions of American humor deserve somewhat more respectful treatment," and he proceeds to give a full page to Petroleum V. Nasby, another page to Artemus Ward and two and one-half pages to Josh Billings, while Mark Twain had received less than four lines. After stating that, in the case of authors like Mark Twain, "temporary amusement, not literary product, is the thing sought and given," Professor Richardson announces that the department of fiction will be considered later. In this "department," Mark Twain is not mentioned at all, although Julian Hawthorne receives over three pages!

I have quoted Professor Richardson at length, because he represents an attitude toward Mark Twain that was common all during the eighties. Another college professor, who is to-day one of the best living American critics, says, in his "Initial Studies in American Letters" (1895), "Though it would be ridiculous to maintain that either of these writers [Artemus Ward and Mark Twain] takes rank with Lowell and Holmes, . . . still it will not do to ignore them as mere buffoons, or even to predict that their humors will soon be forgotten." There is no allusion in his book to "Tom Sawyer" or "Huckleberry Finn," nor does the critic seem to regard their creator as in any sense a novelist. Still another writer, in a passing allusion to Mark Twain, says, "Only a very small portion of his writing has any place as literature."

Literary opinions change as time progresses; and no one could have observed the remarkable demonstration at the seventieth birthday of our great national humorist without feeling that most of his contemporaries regarded him, not as their peer, but as their Chief. Without wishing to make any invidious comparisons, I cannot refrain from commenting on the statement that it would be "ridiculous" to maintain that Mark Twain takes rank with Oliver Wendell Holmes. It is, of course, absolutely impossible to predict the future; the only real test of the value of a book is Time. Who now reads Cowley? Time has laughed at so many contemporary judgments that it would be foolhardy to make positive assertions about literary stock quotations one hundred years from now. Still, guesses are not prohibited; and I think it not unlikely that the name of Mark Twain will out-

last the name of Holmes. American Literature would surely be the poorer if the great Boston Brahmin had not enlivened it with his rich humor, his lambent wit and his sincere pathos; but the whole content of his work seems slighter than the big American prose epics of the man of our day.

Indeed, it seems to me that Mark Twain is our foremost living American writer. He has not the subtlety of Henry James or the wonderful charm of Mr. Howells; he could not have written "Daisy Miller," or "A Modern Instance," or "Indian Summer," or "The Kentons"—books of which every American should be proud, for they exhibit literary quality of an exceedingly high order. I have read these books over and over again, with constantly increasing profit and delight. I wish that Mr. Howells might live forever, and give to every generation the pure intellectual joy that he has given to ours. But the natural endowment of Mark Twain is still greater. Mr. Howells has made the most of himself; God has done it all for Mark Twain. If there be a living American writer touched with true genius, whose books glow with the divine fire, it is he. He has always been a conscientious artist; but no amount of industry could ever have produced a "Huckleberry Finn."

When I was a child at the West Middle Grammar School of Hartford, on one memorable April day, Mark Twain addressed the graduating-class. I was thirteen years old, but I have found it impossible to forget what he said. The subject of his "remarks" was Methuselah. He informed us that Methuselah lived to the ripe old age of nine hundred and sixty-nine. But he might as well have lived to be several thousand—nothing happened. The speaker told us that we should all live longer than Methuselah. Fifty years of Europe are better than a cycle of Cathay, and twenty years of modern American life are longer and richer in content than the old patriarch's thousand. Ours will be the true age in which to live, when more will happen in a day than in a year of the flat existence of our ancestors. I cannot remember his words; but what a fine thing it is to hear a speech, and carry away an idea!

I have since observed that this idea runs through much of his literary work. His philosophy of life underlies his broadest burlesque—for "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court" is simply an exposure of the "good old times." Mark Twain

believes in the Present, in human progress. Too often do we apprehend the Middle Ages through the glowing pages of Spenser and Walter Scott; we see only glittering processions of "ladies dead and lovely knights." Mark Twain shows us the wretched condition of the common people, their utter ignorance and degradation, the coarseness and immorality of technical chivalry, the cruel and unscrupulous ecclesiastical tyranny and the capricious insolence of the barons. One may regret that he has reversed the dynamics in so glorious a book as Malory's "Morte d'Arthur," but, through all the buffoonery and roaring mirth with which the knights in armor are buried, the artistic and moral purpose of the satirist is clear. If I understand him rightly, he would have us believe that *our* age, not theirs, is the "good time"; nay, ours is the age of magic and wonder. We need not regret in melancholy sentimentality and picturesqueness of bygone days, for we ourselves live, not in a material and commonplace generation, but in the very midst of miracles and romance. Merlin and the Fay Morgana would have given all their petty skill to have been able to use a telephone or a phonograph, or to see a moving picture. The sleeping princess and her castle were awakened by a kiss; but in the twentieth century a man in Washington touches a button, and hundreds of miles away tons of machinery begin to move, fountains begin to play and the air resounds with the whir of wheels. In comparison with to-day, the age of chivalry seems dull and poor. Even in chivalry itself our author is more knightly than Lancelot; for was there ever a more truly chivalrous performance than Mark Twain's essay on Harriet Shelley, or his literary monument to Joan of Arc? In these earnest pages, our national humorist appears as the true knight.

Mark Twain's humor is purely American. It is not the humor of Washington Irving, which resembles that of Addison and Thackeray; it is not delicate and indirect. It is genial, sometimes outrageous, mirth—laughter holding both his sides. I have found it difficult to read him in a library or on a street-car, for explosions of pent-up mirth or a distorted face are apt to attract unpleasant attention in such public places. Mark Twain's humor is boisterous, uproarious, colossal, overwhelming. As has often been remarked, the Americans are not naturally a gay people, like the French; nor are we light-hearted and careless, like the Irish and the Negro. At heart, we are intensely serious,

nervous, melancholy. For humor, therefore, we naturally turn to buffoonery and burlesque, as a reaction against the strain and tension of life. Our attitude is something like that of the lonely author of the "Anatomy of Melancholy," who used to lean over the parapet of Magdalen Bridge, and shake with mirth at the horrible jokes of the bargemen. We like Mark Twain's humor, not because we are frivolous, but because we are just the reverse. I have never known a frivolous person who really enjoyed or appreciated Mark Twain.

The essence of Mark Twain's humor is Incongruity. The jumping frog is named Daniel Webster; and, indeed, the intense gravity of a frog's face, with the droop at the corners of the mouth, might well be envied by many an American Senator. When the shotted frog vainly attempted to leave the earth, he shrugged his shoulders "like a Frenchman." Bilgewater and the Dolphin on the raft are grotesquely incongruous figures. The rescuing of Jim from his prison cell is full of the most incongruous ideas, his common-sense attitude toward the whole transaction contrasting strangely with that of the romantic Tom. Along with the constant incongruity goes the element of surprise—which Professor Beers has well pointed out. When one begins a sentence, in an apparently serious discussion, one never knows how it will end. In discussing the peace that accompanies religious faith, Mark Twain says that he has often been impressed with the calm confidence of a Christian with four aces. Exaggeration—deliberate, enormous hyperbole—is another feature. Rudyard Kipling, who has been profoundly influenced by Mark Twain, and has learned much from him, often employs the same device, as in "Brugglesmith." Irreverence is also a noteworthy quality. In his travel-books, we are given the attitude of the typical American Philistine toward the wonders and sacred relics of the Old World, the whole thing being a gigantic burlesque on the sentimental guide-books which were so much in vogue before the era of Baedeker. With so much continuous fun and mirth, satire and burlesque, it is no wonder that Mark Twain should not always be at his best. He is doubtless sometimes flat, sometimes coarse, as all humorists since Rabelais have been. The wonder is that his level has been so high. I remember, just before the appearance of "Following the Equator," I had been told that Mark Twain's inspiration was finally gone, and

that he could not be funny if he tried. To test this, I opened the new book, and this is what I found on the first page:

"We sailed for America, and there made certain preparations. This took but little time. Two members of my family elected to go with me. Also a carbuncle. The dictionary says a carbuncle is a kind of jewel. Humor is out of place in a dictionary."

Although Mark Twain has the great qualities of the true humorist—common sense, human sympathy and an accurate eye for proportion—he is much more than a humorist. His work shows very high literary quality, the quality that appears in first-rate novels. He has shown himself to be a genuine artist. He has done something which many popular novelists have signally failed to accomplish—he has created real characters. His two wonderful boys, Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, are wonderful in quite different ways. The creator of Tom exhibited remarkable observation; the creator of Huck showed the divine touch of imagination. Tom is the American boy—he is "smart." In having his fence whitewashed, in controlling a pool of Sabbath-school tickets at the precise psychological moment, he displays abundant promise of future success in business. Huck, on the other hand, is the child of nature, harmless, sincere and crudely imaginative. His reasonings with Jim about nature and God belong to the same department of natural theology as that illustrated in Browning's "Caliban." The night on the raft with Jim, when these two creatures look aloft at the stars, and Jim reckons the moon laid them, is a case in point.

"We had the sky up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether they was made or just happened. Jim he allowed they was made, but I allowed they happened; I judged it would have took too long to *make* so many. Jim said the moon could a *laid* them; well, that looked kind of reasonable, so I didn't say nothing against it, because I've seen a frog lay most as many, so of course it could be done. We used to watch the stars that fell, too, and see them streak down. Jim allowed they'd got spoiled and was hove out of the nest."

Again, Mark Twain has so much dramatic power that, were his literary career beginning instead of closing, he might write for us the great American play that we are still awaiting. The story of the feud between the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons is thrillingly dramatic, and the tragic climax grips one by the

heart. The shooting of the drunken Boggs, the gathering of the mob and its control by one masterful personality, belong essentially to true drama, and are written with power and insight. The pathos of these scenes is never false, never mawkish or overdone; it is the pathos of life itself. Mark Twain's extraordinary skill in descriptive passages shows, not merely keen observation, but the instinct for the specific word—the one word that is always better than any of its synonyms, for it makes the picture real—it creates the illusion, which is the essence of all literary art. The storm, for example:

“It was my watch below till twelve, but I wouldn't a turned in anyway if I'd had a bed, because a body don't see such a storm as that every day in the week, not by a long sight. My souls, how the wind did scream along! And every second or two there'd come a glare that lit up the white-caps for a half a mile around, and you'd see the islands looking dusty through the rain, and the trees thrashing around in the wind; then comes a *h-wach!*—bum! bum! bumble-umble-um-bum-bum-bum-bum—and the thunder would go rumbling and grumbling away, and quit—and then *rip* comes another flash and another sockdolager. The waves 'most washed me off the raft sometimes, but I hadn't any clothes on, and didn't mind. We didn't have no trouble about snags; the lightning was glaring and flittering around so constant that we could see them plenty soon enough to throw her head this way or that and miss them.”

“Tom Sawyer” and “Huckleberry Finn” are prose epics of American life. The former is one of those books—of which “The Pilgrim's Progress,” “Gulliver's Travels” and “Robinson Crusoe” are supreme examples—that are read at different periods of one's life from very different points of view; so that it is not easy to say when one enjoys them the most—before one understands their real significance or after. Nearly all healthy boys enjoy reading “Tom Sawyer,” because the intrinsic interest of the story is so great, and the various adventures of the hero are portrayed with such gusto. Yet it is impossible to outgrow the book. The eternal Boy is there, and one cannot appreciate the nature of boyhood properly until one has ceased to be a boy. The other masterpiece, “Huckleberry Finn,” is really not a child's book at all. Children devour it, but they do not digest it. It is a permanent picture of a certain period of American history, and this picture is made complete, not so much by the striking portraits of individuals placed on the huge canvas, as by the

vital unity of the whole composition. If one wishes to know what life on the Mississippi really was, to know and understand the peculiar social conditions of that highly exciting time, one has merely to read through this powerful narrative, and a definite, coherent, vivid impression remains.

By those who have lived there, and whose minds are comparatively free from prejudice, Mark Twain's pictures of life in the South before the war are regarded as, on the whole, nearer the truth than those supplied by any other artist. One reason for this is the aim of the author; he was not trying to support or to defend any particular theory—no, his aim was purely and wholly artistic. In "Uncle Tom's Cabin," a book by no means devoid of literary art, the red-hot indignation of the author largely nullified her evident desire to tell the truth. If one succeeds in telling the truth about anything whatever, one must have something more than the *desire* to tell the truth; one must know how to do it. False impressions do not always, probably do not commonly, come from deliberate liars. Mrs. Stowe's astonishing work is not really the history of slavery; it is the history of abolition sentiment. On the other hand, writers so graceful, talented and clever as Mr. Page and Mr. Hopkinson Smith do not always give us pictures that correctly represent, except locally, the actual situation before the war; for these gentlemen seem to have "Uncle Tom's Cabin" in mind. Mark Twain gives us both points of view; he shows us the beautiful side of slavery—for it had a wonderfully beautiful, patriarchal side—and he also shows us the horror of it. The living dread of the negro that he would be sold down the river, has never been more vividly represented than when the poor woman in "Pudd'nhead Wilson" sees the water swirling against the snag, and realizes that she is bound the wrong way. That one scene makes an indelible impression on the reader's mind, and counteracts tons of polemics. The peculiar harmlessness of Jim is beautiful to contemplate. Although he and Huck really own the raft, and have taken all the risk, they obey implicitly the orders of the two tramps who call themselves Duke and King. Had that been a raft on the Connecticut River, and had Huck and Jim been Yankees, they would have said to the intruders, "Whose raft is this, anyway?"

Mark Twain may be trusted to tell the truth; for the eye of the born caricature artist always sees the salient point. Caricatures

often give us a better idea of their object than a photograph; for the things that are exaggerated, be it a large nose, or a long neck, are, after all, the things that differentiate this particular individual from the mass. Everybody remembers how Tweed was caught by one of Nast's cartoons.

Mark Twain is through and through American. If foreigners really wish to know the American spirit, let them read Mark Twain. He is far more American than their favorite specimen, Walt Whitman. The essentially American qualities of common sense, energy, enterprise, good humor and Philistinism fairly shriek from his pages. He reveals us in our limitations, in our lack of appreciation of certain beautiful things, fully as well as he pictures us in coarser but more triumphant aspects. It is, of course, preposterous to say that Americans are totally different from other humans; we have no monopoly of common sense and good humor, nor are we all hide-bound Philistines. But there is something pronounced in the American character, and the books of Mark Twain reveal it. He has also more than once been a valuable and efficient champion. Without being an offensive and blatant Jingo, I think he is well satisfied to be an American.

Mark Twain is our great Democrat. Democracy is his political, social and moral creed. His hatred of snobbery, affectation and assumed superiority is total. His democracy has no limits; it is bottomless and far-reaching. Nothing seems really sacred to him except the sacred right of every individual to do exactly as he pleases; which means, of course, that no one can interfere with another's right, for then democracy would be the privilege of a few, and would stultify itself. Not only does the spirit of democracy breathe out from all his greater books, but it is shown in specific instances, such as "Travelling with a Reformer"; and Mark Twain has more than once given testimony for his creed, without recourse to the pen.

At the head of all American novelists, living and dead, stands Nathaniel Hawthorne, unapproached, possibly unapproachable. His fine and subtle art is an altogether different thing from the art of our mighty, democratic, national humorist. But Literature is wonderfully diverse in its content; and the historian of American Letters, in the far future, will probably find it impossible to omit the name of Mark Twain, whose books have warmed human hearts all over the world.

WILLIAM LYON PHELPS.